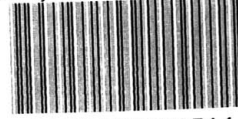


Labor Organizations in America

by Cyrus Crane

1887

A senior thesis project of the University of Kansas



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Thesis
1997
Crane

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A Graduation Thesis

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Cyrus Crane,
K. S. U. 1887.

Labor Organizations in America

The movement towards the organization of labor has, within the past century, grown to such enormous proportions that it is recognized by Political Economy as an important factor in the development of the economic life of the world.

Although this rapid growth is of recent date, yet the organization of labor and laborers into distinct classes and societies dates far back in the world's history. Many of these old organizations are called guilds, but the guilds, strictly speaking, belong to Medieval times, in the history of which they played an important part.

At the dawn of authentic history we find no mention made of labor organizations of any kind, yet before many centuries we can trace their beginnings. There are some reasons, (not very definitive ones however) for believing that there existed both in Egypt and in Greece certain organizations of

laborers. But in Rome, ~~the fact~~ their existence is fully established. There they were called collegia. They did a great work in protecting and strengthening the various trades and on this account they were continually opposed by the aristocracy.

After the downfall of the Empire labor organizations next appear as guilds, and they continue to grow in number and importance. The object of these guilds is similar to that of present labor combinations. In the United States Consular Reports on the Trade Guilds of Europe their object and purpose are fully set forth and in a manner so applicable to labor organizations of our own day that a quotation will be in place. Guilds have always had a certain democratic character. They owe their origin to the endeavor of the toiling masses to free themselves from the yoke of oppression and to secure

to themselves and their posterity
the privileges of citizenship, equality
before the law, rights of labor and
other inalienable rights. To secure
these ends, organization was
necessary, for individuals, acting
single handed, were powerless to
achieve anything against a
tyrannical aristocracy, sustained
by wealth, royalty, and the sword.
From time immemorial, gold,
property and rank, as they have
been possessed by the aristocratic
minority, have had far more value
and influence than the toil of the
great majority, who held the secrets
of the workshop and brought to light
the treasures of the mines, and it is
only of late that the laborer and the
artisan have found it possible
to stand up like men and make
themselves felt in the social and
political history of the nations."

The guilds were of great importance
in the growth and development of
towns and cities of the middle
ages. The guilds of Magdeburg
and Strasbourg are particularly

factions. Like the old Collegians in Rome they incurred the hatred of the aristocracy, chiefly on account of their bold and fearless champion-ship of civil liberty. In England the "Merchant gild" came first into existence. This was composed of the wealthier classes who had capital enough to undertake large enterprises. In opposition to these there arose the "Craft gilds" whose membership was made up of artisans and skilled workmen. These later gilds were very strict in their regulations and quite unbecomingly powerful and powerful. But, much, their growth was slow. Green, in his History of England, speaking of the "craft-gilds" says (and this is significant and worthy of notice): "the first steps in their existence were the most difficult, for to enable a trade-gild to carry out its objects with any success, it was first necessary that the whole body of craftsmen belonging to the trade should be compelled to

to join the guild, and secondly, that a legal control over the trade itself should be secured to it."

By the vicissitudes of 17 or 9 years, Arkwright, Watts and others, in the latter part of the last century, the factory system came into existence. This system wrought of course, a great change in industrial conditions. It gave birth to modern trade-unions. The unions were at first opposed by the government, but afterwards they were legalized and have flourished ever since.

From this brief historical sketch it will be seen that the organization of laborers into societies for the purposes of assistance, support and protection is not new or peculiar to the present day. It will be seen also that these organizations have been uniformly opposed by the wealthier and aristocratic classes, that they have flourished in commercial countries and in thickly populated districts, that their needs

something of good in them, and
benefit to their members, so that
they would not have a frequent
existence, for any institution,
which is entirely bad, cannot
survive the test of so many years.

In America, during the Colonial Period,
there was no attempt at organiza-
tion. The reason - sparseness of
population - is evident enough.
In 1790, when the first census was
taken, there was but one city with
a population between forty and
twenty-five thousand. "Early in
the present ~~century~~ century the
laborers began to organize and
form societies of their kind. In 1803
the "New York Society of Journeyman
Spirits" was formed; 1806, "House
Craftsmen" of the City of New York; earlier,
probably, than either of these was
organized "The New York Typograph-
ical Society." Mr. Master gives
an account of the strike, or something
similar to a strike which occurred
among the New York Sailors in 1802.
They wished to raise their wages and

Endeavored to do it by quitting a
work. New York, being the largest city,
was the first place where organization
was attempted, but in 1822 "The
Columbian Charitable Society of
Spiritsmiths and Caulkers of
Boston and Charleston" was form-
ed. Until 1825 these, and other
organizations of similar character
were not very powerful or very rapid
in growth or extension, but after
that time ^{and} until 1860 they
gradually became more important
and numerous. During this
period frequent attempts at
national organization were made,
and workmen's political parties
were formed. New York and Boston
were the chief centers of labor agit-
ation and activity. Different
local organizations often banded
together and organized general
strikes. In the decade immediately
preceding the War trades-unions
were full of activity and extended
in many directions. Their influ-
ence is stated that twenty-six
trades had national organizations

in 1860."

The Civil War brought many changes in the industrial conditions of the masses, and altered in manifold ways the National life. It served as a powerful stimulus to the growth of labor organizations, because it gave them greater chance for united action and showed with great clearness the marked contrasts between rich and poor. Slavery was abolished, trade and more rapid communication was facilitated, Economic questions were brought into notice, and immediately thereafter the industries of the Country began to be conducted on a larger scale. Large numbers of workmen are now congregated together and cities increase in size and number. To these, as causes, can be traced the present Economic growth of labor organizations. It would be most high impossible (and it is needless) to attempt an enumeration of all the various

labor unions, societies and orders.
It will suffice to make mention
of that "most powerful and
remarkable labor organization of
Modern times - The Knights of
Labor." Prof R. T. Ely says that its
originator was Uriah S. Stevens,
a tailor of Philadelphia, who
called together eight of his friends
on Thanksgiving Day 1869. In
this little group the present powerful
order had its beginning; since
then its growth has been truly
marvelous. In 1883 the number
of members was 52,000; in
1884, 71,000; 1885, 111,000; the
present membership, though not
definitely known, is probably more
than a million.

Now when we come to inquire
what benefit these organizations
are, and whether they are obtaining
the end for which they were insti-
tuted - The elevation of labor and
the laborer - the task becomes one
of great difficulty. For our
Economists have not, as a rule,
treated them in a practical way,

There has been, both on the part
of newspaper writers and professors
of Political Economists a great deal
of theorizing and fault finding, ~~as~~
~~but~~ ~~but~~ ~~but~~ few attempts to estimate
their real worth by balancing
their good features against their
weak and harmful characteristics.
In trying to form some estimate
of their value and usefulness, it is
at once evident that they possess
strength. That "union is strength" needs
no proof or demonstration. The
question then arises as to the
use of the strength. For this short
space we have room for the enumera-
tion of but four principle uses,
to which organizations of labor have
been put.

1. The labor market.
2. For Human and Charitable purposes.
3. Educational purposes.
4. Political uses and ⁱⁿ attempts to
secure more favorable legislation.

1 It is now conceded by the best
Political Economists that the

Price of labor is regulated by
supply and demand. J.S. Mill
abandoned the wages-fund theory
and gave his support to this doctrine.
Now any ordinary merchant can
influence the law of supply and
demand to a certain extent and
by withholding temporarily, his
frank from the market, gain in
the end a higher price for them.

Combinations of laborers make
it possible for laborers to gain
in the same way, for they have
reserve funds and can present the
commodity-labor, while it is
wanting. Isolated laborers are
very seldom able to do this.

Again these combinations or
organizations enable the laborers
to find the best market. They have
their own organs and papers
which keep accurate statistics
of the ~~the~~ labor market and ^{then} indicate
to the laborers at what points
various kinds of labor are in
demand. Another good plan,
common to English trades-unions
and ^{which} is rapidly being adopted into

our view is thus stated by Prof. Ely:
When the demand for labor falls, it
is the practice of the older stronger
unions not to allow their members
to work below the usual rate of wages,
and this is one of the chief ~~causes~~
means to maintain the standard
of life among the laborers, a
matter of vital importance in the
science of political economy.
If there is a decreased demand, they
would not find employment at
reduced wages; but -- see reduc-
tion would give rise to another.

The labor organizations prefer
therefore to support their members
until the labor market improves, or
to work fewer hours each day, than
to work at reduced wages. This
plan is in accord with the estab-
lished principles of political
economy and most accordingly
for the benefit.

In connection with labor organiza-
tions much has been said about
strikes and arbitration. The first
have been almost uniformly condemned

denied and the latter affirmed.
Without organization both of these
methods of regulating wages are
practically impossible. For one
man cannot well arbitrate with
a powerful corporation; nor can
strikes be successfully conducted
without united action. To their
credit, be it said, that our organiza-
tions are in favor of the plan
of arbitration rather than strikes.
Samuel Ryan in his book on
"Arbitration" says that ^{with} ~~the~~
exception of the labor societies
in the U. S. favor arbitration.
Failures ~~to~~ in arbitration
bring on strikes. Now strikes
are not always entirely wrong.
No rational man is foolish
enough ^{to justify} the destruction of property,
but on the other hand, it can be
shown that all strikes are not
violent and many have even been
productive of good. They are often
times necessary, and the very
possibility of their occurrence prevents
many unjust actions on the part
of employers. They are not always

Successful, but in many cases they
have been and this fact is known
to the laborers. Thus when Prof
Simon Hewenut says to the
laborer, "When a man receives
the order, 'Do not go to work to-day', it
is the same to him whether it
comes from a ~~en~~zar, a satrap, or
a master workman, Our laws
do not even require the right
of a man to sell himself as
slavery, and, except as a matter
of sentiment and feeling, this
giving up of liberty is not a
whit better than an involuntary
slavery", he utters very good
sentiments, but his generalization
have very little weight, where the
laborer reflects on the successful
issue of many strikes and thinks
that, since "the Devil must be
brought with fire" he can place
with fairness, strikes against
lockouts. In New Jersey 135
strikes were recorded in two years.
62 of these were for higher wages
out of which 42 were successful, 13
failed and 7 compromised.

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In 1883, Mr. Adolph Strasser, the
President of the Cigar Makers Inter-
national Union testified -- that
there had been 362 strikes
among the cigar makers, recognized by
his organization, of which 222 were
successful, 137 lost, 17 compromised,
and 10 then in progress. "Of 222
strikes in New York investigated
by the Labor Commission, fifty-nine
were still pending, and of the
remainder, fifty-nine percent
were won, twenty-one percent lost
and twenty percent compromised."
These statistics are not given in
defense or justification of strikes,
but simply to show that "gathering
generalities" will not suffice
to convince labor that they are a
failure. Yet in spite of many
successes through strikes, labor
organizations do not favor them,
and have even done much to
prevent them. Says Prof Ely: "The
records of our labor organizations
show the suppression of vast
numbers of strikes; it is safe to say
of the great majority - Antemplated."

The whole machinery of the Knights of Labor is designed to prevent strikes. J. J. Ryan (before quoted) testifies that labor organizations have done far more since the suppression of lawlessness and destruction than in the promotion of strikes.

Prof. E. W. Beccus says: "Instead of promoting lawlessness and anarchy, as many suppose, our large, responsible unions do much to repress it. The recent outbreaks in Belgium are ascribed by many trustworthy authorities to the absence, in years past, of labor organizations, which would have raised wages and improved industrial conditions so as to remove all excuse for violence. Strikes are better than bloodshed."

It cannot be ^{denied} that some of the attempts of the labor organizations to influence the labor market and benefit themselves are inhuman and cruel. Of this nature are boycotts and refusals to work with non-union men. The writer has

men many non-union fruiters
deprived of work, and when seeking
for it elsewhere the Union men
have kept the brand upon them
and used every effort to keep them
out of employment. These features
of labor ^{or quasi-labor} are decidedly bad and cannot be
fallaciously excused.

2. Educational purposes Humanity
and Charitable purposes.

English trade-unions annually
spend large sums for the amelio-
ration of their unfortunate and disabled,
and in this, as in many other
respects, our unions are modelling
after them. The Locomotive Engineers
had in 1854, 4,252 members and
had paid out in insurance and
other similar ways nearly \$2,000,000.
The Knights of Labor now pay
\$500 on the death of a member that
has paid the usual sum assured
on those that wish the benefit.
The local assemblies of the same
order aid needy members and dis-
burse in this way from \$10,000
to \$200,000 annually. And in all
the different organizations this feature

and it is a good one, is running
very good.

Labor organizations have always
been frequent in the agitation
for fewer hours of labor and for more
human and kindly treatment of
employees, and it is largely due
to their efforts that beneficial changes
have been made. The New York
street car drivers were enabled, by
united effort, to secure a reduction
from fifteen to ten hours in the
length of a day's labor. In New
England factory regulations have
improved greatly since the unions
became strong enough to make
themselves felt. The eight hour
movement has received the
support, not of all, but of a
majority of these organizations.
Our present labor societies are
in our respect a vast improve-
ment on the old guilds. They are
much more comprehensive and
accept in membership not only
skilled artisans, but all classes
of laborers. Thus their benefits

accuse to all alike and affords
the strong an opportunity to help
the weak.

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Educational uses

That labor organizations are
great needed and need education is generally conceded by
those who have given them un-
prejudiced consideration, and it
seems evident that they would
be from their very nature. There
is always an educating and
broadening influence to be derived
from association. This is enhanced
when the associated body makes
it a practice to discuss questions
of importance and matters which
relate to its own interests.

Washington Gladden says truly
enough, "it happens that a very
large proportion of the members
of them (labor organizations) are
ignorant men, whose passions
are easily excited and who may be
led to take very fanciful and
absurd views of the labor question."
Yet it is folly to make such
statements for it only augers

the laborers and does not do any good. Deliberation and discussion are educators and they ought to be encouraged. In these organizations, Mackey gives opportunity for their best work. Says Prof. Ely: "In addition to questions of public policy, the laborers in their organizations are bound to consider what they can do collectively and individually as laborers apart from government, to improve their situation, and this keeps a whole multitude of questions before every labor society, and as many minds receive many opinions, there is abundant opportunity for vigorous debate."

The value of the Knights of Labor as a temperance organization is too well known to need comment.

Many organizations are putting forth great efforts to secure libraries and to gain a thorough accurate knowledge of social and economic questions. This must prove of great benefit, for the

Political Economists claim that a thorough knowledge of economic laws would remove much suffering and would be of great assistance in the elevation and improvement of the laboring classes.

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Political uses and attempts to secure more favorable legislation. It is here that labor organizations have made many serious blunders and mistakes. And in the preamble to the Constitution of the Knights of Labor, mingled with many noble sentiments we find very queer political demands - demands which are not justifiable in the light of past history. Then too when these organizations enter into politics they often fall prey to demagogues and unscrupulous politicians who pose as labor reformers.

In legislation their achievements have not been great, yet the justly famous factory legislation in England, and the attempts in the same direction in the

United States, are largely due to
the agitation of the labor organizations.
In February of the present year, and
on that important day the 22nd
the United Labor Party was organized
at Cincinnati. This party is
composed of various labor societies
and possesses considerable strength.
In the recent Spring elections it
placed tickets in the field in
various cities and in some of them
it met with success. What it
will do in the future we can
tell. But I believe that this is
a dangerous procedure. Aside
from the fact that legislation
makes a great mistake when
it tries to control the labor
market or regulate the price of
labor, it is dangerous to have
in our midst such vast bodies
~~of~~ under the control of a very
few men. Mr. Prudery said
in a recent speech that he
would not exchange his present
position for the presidency of
the United States. History shows

plainly that it is always formidable to liberty to have large masses who will blindly follow a chosen leader.

From these and other considerations, I am led to believe that labor organizations are productive of more good than evil; that their evil and injurious features are rapidly passing away through the efforts of larger minded men who are really interested in labor's cause. And it is, I believe the duty of all thoughtful men not to abuse and smother the attempts of the laborers to improve their condition but to assist them and to make these organizations a powerful weapon in removing many unjust conditions which still exist in many departments of manual toil. No one can deny that the organizations commit many blunders, yet the good they do more than compensate; and the blunders will ~~disappear~~ disappear when they receive ^{the} careful thought

and unprejudiced consideration of
all classes of society. Prof. Thorold
Rogers was the most efficient of
Political Economists says: "The only
remedy of the many shortcomings
of the present position of the
artisan, factory, mill or mine
operative, and agricultural
laborer, is the extension of labor
organizations on the principle of
trade unions, but with considerable
improvement in detail."

Cyrus Crane